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SUBJECT: WORLD RELIGIOUS LEADERS SUMMIT IN RUSSIA CALLS FOR ACTIVE DEFENSE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Classified By: DCM Daniel Russell. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Meeting in Moscow July 3-5, more than 200 religious leaders and clergy from over 40 countries called on believers of all faiths to engage in dialogue and partnership to resolve global problems, as well as to challenge terrorism, extremism, and efforts to restrict religious freedom. President Putin echoed this theme in his remarks to the group when he underscored the powerful unifying force of religion and encouraged interfaith dialogue to mitigate extremist tendencies that could lead to violence. Most of the world's major religions were represented at the summit, which was organized by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and timed to take place just prior to the G8 Summit in St. Petersburg. The final declaration encouraged interfaith cooperation and could signal easing of tensions between the ROC and some other denominations -- most notably the Roman Catholic Church -- but it will require considerable effort by all sides to follow up the soaring rhetoric with concrete action. END SUMMARY.

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WORLD RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONVENE IN MOSCOW

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¶2. (SBU) More than 200 religious leaders and clergy from over 40 countries met in Moscow July 3-5 at the World Summit of Religious Leaders to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Representatives of the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Shinto faiths responded to an invitation from Russia's ROC-dominated Interreligious Council to convene in advance of the St. Petersburg G8 Summit. Pointedly missing from the invitation list were Pope Benedict, the Dalai Lama, Muslim leaders from Iraq, and leaders of some of the so-called (by the ROC) "new religions," such as the Hare Krishnas, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other Protestant groups. ROC spokesman Vsevelod Chaplin was quoted as saying: "It would be difficult for us to sit at the same table as Jehovah's Witnesses, who strongly distort the teaching of Christianity." The Vatican sent a senior delegation consisting of five cardinals, and the Pope offered his personal greetings to participants, which ROC spiritual leader Patriarch Aleksey II subsequently acknowledged as a testimony to the "positive development of relations between the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches." Metropolitan Kirill, head of the ROC's External Church Relations Department, was the nominal chairman of the three-day event.

¶3. (SBU) In addition to senior religious figures, the summit attracted a number of political leaders. Putin opened the meeting with an address in which he underscored the power of religion and encouraged believers to work together to counter extremism, xenophobia, and ethnic and religious intolerance, as well as to guard against those who used religion as a justification to advance political goals, including terrorism

and separatism. He warned participants that a "conflict of civilizations was unfolding in the world and that it was necessary to understand the consequences of this confrontation." Putin described attempts to drive wedges between Christian and Muslim communities as a new global challenge. He encouraged the religious summit leaders to develop recommendations, which he promised to convey to his G8 counterparts when they met in St. Petersburg July 15-17. Other senior GOR officials participating in the summit included Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan reportedly also sent greetings to the participants.

¶4. (SBU) Many participants of the summit addressed the issue of extremism, and religious education was proposed as an antidote to it. "One of the reasons behind extremism is ignorance of religious tradition," said Kirill. "An absence of positive knowledge about religion allows dishonest people to encourage others to embrace extremist views," he continued. "We are facing international terrorism that misuses religion, especially when it is used for a pretext for hatred and murder," said Cardinal Walther Kasper, the top Catholic representative at the summit. Armenia's Catholicos Garegin II also blamed secularism for extremist violence, and Russia's chief rabbi, Berl Lazar, said that international terrorism "is recruiting militants by using religion." Religious leaders should, in his view, play a more active role in society as "spiritual leaders." "It is not religion at all that causes terrorism and extremism," said Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin, chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia. "Religious feelings are fueled to the boiling point only against the background of social and economic problems, and it usually happens in the service of someone's concrete political interests," he added.

MOSCOW 00007493 002 OF 003

¶5. (SBU) There was obvious tension at the conference between Jewish leaders and Iran's leading ayatollah for interfaith relations, Muhammed Ali Muhammed Taskhiri. At the opening ceremony, Israel's Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger pointedly said with reference to Iran's president Mahmud Ahmadinejad: "There are leaders in the world who deny the Holocaust and speak of genocide against themselves only, and it is our duty to tell these people that not a single person in the world has the right to say that another country should disappear." In response, at the final press conference, Taskhiri said he could have a dialogue with Judaism but not with Zionism: "If you mean dialogue between Iran and Israel, I see nothing in common here on which to base a dialogue."

¶6. (SBU) The final declaration, which had been drafted before the summit, underscored the importance of religion for social order, cross-cultural dialogue, and international peace. It has two basic premises: first, that religion should be a unifying and pacifying force, rather than a divisive tool that incites conflict; and second, that religion, government, and civil society should partner to fight major threats at both the domestic and international levels. It called for respect for all religions, encouraged state-civil-religious partnerships to enhance ethical values in domestic society and promotion of global development -- from fighting poverty to dealing with AIDS and drug addiction. The declaration also addressed social issues, emphasizing the value of human life "from conception to final breath and natural death" and the importance of the family. The declaration emphasized the importance of human rights as a concern for religious leaders, but within the confines of a religious re-interpretation of human rights, similar to the one announced at a national forum organized by the ROC in April. The declaration also included several statements on international affairs that clearly echoed GOR thinking. For example, it referred to the virtue of combining democracy with the "moral feeling, way of life, various legal and political systems, and national and religious traditions of people," and to the desirability of a multipolar world with

many different but equal types of government. It also stated that religious leaders should have a "more systematic partnership" with the United Nations.

¶ 7. (C) Participants at the summit told us that in general they were pleased with the event. They said it was mainly a showpiece for the ROC and another feather in Putin's cap in the run-up to the G8, but nevertheless it gave the participants a chance to interact with one another. Those who were not invited -- such as the Hare Krishnas, who asked to attend but were denied -- complained that it was just another sign the ROC did not really believe in a multidenominational society and that the ROC thought it could cherry-pick which religions were "legitimate" in Russia. The Hare Krishnas also made the point that, although Hinduism is the world's third largest religion with around 850 million followers, only two Hindus were invited to the summit.

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¶ 8. (C) Carefully orchestrated to take place just prior to this year's G8 Summit, the World Summit of Religious Leaders was an opportunity to portray Russian society as tolerant and magnanimous, as well as to showcase Putin's acknowledgment of religion as a powerful social and political force that should be harnessed to benefit society. The summit was also designed to bolster the credentials of the ROC, casting the Church as inclusive and welcoming. The deliberate failure to invite the Dalai Lama, however, demonstrates that the ROC is still not ready to ignore political realities, i.e., Chinese objections to the Dalai Lama, for the sake of religious harmony. It is also worth noting that the final declaration issued by summit leaders incorporated several themes of Russian foreign policy, such as a reference to double standards and the importance of fighting terrorism, and implicitly acknowledged the increasingly intimate relationship between the GOR and the ROC.

¶ 9. (C) That said, the summit was an important event that brought together in one place senior religious figures who represented the vast majority of the world's population. They produced an uplifting declaration that balances the demands of religious believers for tolerance and acceptance with a pragmatic acknowledgment that secular problems must also be addressed if the effort to shape healthy community attitudes is to succeed. In addition, the exchange of positive messages between Pope Benedict and Aleksey II is evidence of the continuing thaw in relations between the two churches. Nonetheless, it will take considerably more than

MOSCOW 00007493 003 OF 003

soaring rhetoric and good feelings to transform the summit leaders' declaration into a concrete action plan that tangibly advances religious tolerance.

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